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ABSTRACT

This paper examines some reasons why American firms often have difficulty in conducting business overseas. The importance of language and culture in developing the marketing skills needed to penetrate international markets effectively is discussed, as are a variety of mistakes which U.S. corporations have made in international trade with respect to language, culture, and values, with examples of such mistakes culled from the past few decades. What U.S. corporations can and should be doing to become more effective in the global marketing of goods and services is the focus of most of this paper. It is pointed out that the assessment of a country's culture for marketing purposes involves the analysis of its people's attitudes, motivations, perceptions, and learning processes, and information is provided that specifically summarizes such cultural determinants. The clear implication for American business practitioners as they review their record of cultural/linguistic mistakes in the global marketplace is that financial and placement support for academically and professionally trained individuals in multinational business and modern languages are sorely and critically necessary to improve the United States' approach to marketing across cultures. Contains a seven-item bibliography. (GLR)

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"Marketing Across Cultures: Blending Language, Cultural, and Marketing Skills"

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MARKETING ACROSS CULTURES: BLENDING LANGUAGE, CULTURAL, AND MARKETING SKILLS

Barney T. Raffield, III, Ph.D.

International divisions and multinational operations are all but standard now for the majority of U. S. corporations. Through the early years of U. S. involvement in international trade, many serious mistakes were made by American companies in their approach to and treatment of business and consumer communities overseas. These mistakes seemed to occur largely because of U. S. provincialism and ignorance of the importance of language, culture, and values, in the countries where American firms desired to transact business. The consequences of such errors were often losses of great amounts of both money and international goodwill.

This paper specifically focuses on the importance of language and culture in developing the marketing skills needed to penetrate international markets effectively. A variety of mistakes which U. S. corporations have made in international trade with respect to language, culture, and values will be examined as well as what U. S. corporations can and should be doing to become more effective in the global marketing of goods and services.

Some Examples of U. S. Corporate Mistakes in International Marketing

Language Mistakes

Many U. S. corporations have had difficulty crossing the language barrier, with results ranging from mild embarrassment to outright failure. Seemingly harmless brand names and advertising phrases can take on unintended or hidden messages when translated into other languages, but such mistakes can make a marketer look somewhat like a buffoon to foreign consumers. The following are

some actual examples of language and translation errors made by U. S. corporations in international markets (Ricks, 1983; Zikmund and D'Amico, 1989).

When Coca-Cola first marketed Coke in China during the 1920s, it developed a group of Chinese characters, when pronounced, sounded like the product name. Unfortunately, the literal translation of the characters was "bite the wax tadpole." Today, the characters on Chinese Coke bottles translate as "happiness in the mouth."

Several U. S. automobile manufacturers have had similar problems when their brand names crashed into the language barrier. Chevrolet's Nova translated into Spanish as **no va**--"It doesn't go." Subsequently, General Motors changed the name to Caribe, and sales increased. General Motors "Body by Fisher" slogan became "Corpse by Fisher" when translated into Japanese. Ford introduced its Fiera truck to a variety of Spanish-speaking countries only to learn that the name means "ugly old woman" in Spanish. Adding insult to injury, Ford introduced its Comet automobile in Mexico as the Caliente, a Mexican slang term for "streetwalker." On the other hand, Rolls Royce avoided the name Silver Mist in German markets where "mist" means "manure." Sunbeam, however, entered the German market with its Mist-Stick hair curling iron; and, as should have been expected, found that German women had little use or desire for a "manure wand."

One well-intentioned American market introduced its shampoo product to the Brazilian market under the name Evitol, which unfortunately for that company translates as "dandruff contraceptive" in Portuguese. Another U. S. company had trouble marketing Pet evaporated milk in French-speaking countries where the word "pet" means, among other things, "to break wind." Finally, two American corporations learned a painful lesson when one found that tomato paste becomes

tomato glue when translated into Arabic, and the other learned that Herculon carpets are the "carpeting with the big derriere" when translated into Spanish.

Many of these language and translation errors were corrected quickly enough to cause little more than a temporary embarrassment and loss of sales and profits for U. S. corporations. However, many others were not caught and amended so quickly, and later led to many unforseen consequences involving more long term loss of sales, profits, market credibility, and international goodwill. Today, the multinational company must carefully screen its brand names and advertising messages to guard against those which might damage sales and profits, make the U. S. firm look silly, or offend potential customers in specific international markets.

Culture and Values Mistakes

Global marketers need to be aware of each market's cultural environment, in that culture generally refers to people sharing a distinctive heritage. This heritage teaches standards, language, lifestyles, and goals. A culture is inculcated, and very much like consumer attitudes, is not easily changed. Almost every culture in the world has a different culture, and continental differences may exist as well. A U. S. firm unfamiliar with, or insensitive to, a foreign culture may attempt to market products and services that are unacceptable to, or misunderstood by, that culture (Zikmund and D' Amico, 1989; Evans and Berman, 1985).

The following examples represent a collection of cultural mistakes that American companies have made in international markets during the past few decades.

Gestures speak louder than words. "I knew I'd committed a monumental goof, but I couldn't imagine how." A young computer salesperson from New Jersey is remembering his first overseas sales pitch. The scene was his company's offices in Rio de Janeiro, and it had gone like a Sunday preacher's favorite sermon. As he looked around the table, he knew he had clinched the sale. Triumphantly, he raised his hand to his Latin customers and flashed the classic American okay sign--thumb and forefinger forming a circle, with other fingers pointing up. The sunny Brazilian atmosphere suddenly felt like a deep freeze with stony silence, icy stares, and embarrassed smirks from his colleagues. Calling for a break, they took him outside the conference room and explained. He had just treated everyone to a gesture with roughly the same meaning over there as the notorious third-finger sign conveys so vividly here.

Pepsodent was unsuccessful in southeast Asia because it promised white teeth to a culture where black or yellow teeth are symbols of prestige. In Quebec, a canned-fish manufacturer tried to promote a product by showing a woman dressed in shorts, golfing with her husband, and planning to serve the canned fish for dinner; all these activities violated local cultural norms. Campbell Soup lost over $8 million in Brazil by failing to discover that the typical housewife in the subtropical areas of the country felt that they were failing to fulfill their roles as homemakers by not serving their families a soup that they had made themselves.

Toward the Development of Standardized Strategies for Marketing Across Cultures

Exactly what have U. S. corporations learned about languages and cultures from the rather embarrassing, not to mention frequently extraordinarily expensive, global marketing mistakes cited above. Greater and more sensitive

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cultural awareness, to include both primary and more subtle language differences, can be vastly improved in American firms through the development of a "master plan" through which the company will create an appropriate and effective marketing mix for each of the products and services which it wishes to market in a particular foreign country. Cultural awareness can be improved by employing local personnel in key positions, hiring local marketing research specialists, locating company offices in each country where there are operations, actively studying cultural differences, and being responsive to cultural changes (Evans and Berman, 1985).

It is indeed imperative that U. S. firms learn more effective and more acceptable strategies for use in their global marketing efforts. There are major and often contradictory norms and values as one studies various cultures throughout the world. Is it even possible for the American firm which wishes to conduct business in international markets to do so efficiently, tactfully, effectively, and quite importantly, profitably? During the last twelve years, numerous pieces of scholarly research have been conducted in an effort to provide an answer to this vital question. This particular paper will cite the results of two such studies completed by James Engel, Roger Blackwell, and David Kollat; and by Herbert Henzler.

An assessment of a country's culture for marketing purposes involves the analysis of its people's attitudes, motivations, perceptions, and learning processes (Jain, 1987). The following information more specifically summarizes such cultural determinants (Engel, Kollat, and Blackwell, 1978).

Determine relevant motivations in the culture. What needs are fulfilled with this product in the minds of members of the culture? How are these needs presently fulfilled? Do members of the culture readily recognize these needs?

Determine characteristic behavior patterns. What patterns are characteristic of purchasing? What forms of division of labor exist within the family structure? How frequently are products of this type purchased? What size packages are normally purchased? Do any of these characteristic behaviors conflict with the behavior expected for this product? How strongly ingrained are the behavior patterns that conflict with those needed for distribution of this product?

Determine what broad cultural values are relevant to this product. Are there strong values about work, morality, religion, family relations, and so on, that relate to the product? Does this product connote attributes that are in conflict with these cultural values? Can conflicts with values be avoided by changing the product? Are there positive values in this culture with which the product might be identified?

Determine characteristic forms of decision-making. Do members of the culture display a studied approach to decisions concerning innovations, or do they rely more on an impulsive approach? What is the form of the decision process? Upon what information sources do members of the culture rely? Do members of the culture tend to be rigid or flexible in the acceptance of new ideas? What criteria do they use in evaluating alternatives?

Evaluate promotion methods appropriate to the culture. What role does advertising occupy in the culture? What themes, words, or illustrations, are taboo in the culture? What types of salespeople are accepted by members of the culture? Are such salespeople available?

Determine appropriate institutions for this product in the minds of consumers. What types of retailers and intermediary institutions are available? What services do institutions offer that are expected by the consumer? What

alternatives are available for obtaining services needed for the product but not offered existing institutions? How are various types of retailers regarded by consumers? Will changes in the distribution structure be readily accepted?

The questions cited above attempt to relate cultural traits to marketing decisions. For instance, simply knowing about the social institutions, religion, and language differences, in a particular country is not enough. The global marketer who attempts to market across cultures must also understand what cultural impact, whether positive, negative, or both, his/her product will have on a specific country. Simply looking at an aggregation of individual facts and other specific forms of data, cannot replace the use of a systemic and carefully researched approach to the understanding of the marketing practices and taboos of various markets throughout the world.

In addition to Engel, Kollat, and Blackwell's cross-cultural analysis of consumer behavior detailed above, Henzler (1981) developed some standardized strategies for business firms to utilize in their attempts to market across cultures. These strategies are organized according to the phase of economic development into which a particular country falls, categorized as developing, take-off, or mature **(see Table 1)**. According to Jain (1987), companies are too often inclined to regard "overseas" as a single market, or at least to differentiate very little among various markets. Too many global marketers in the past have assumed that product or service ideas suited for one level of economic development are just as well suited for all other countries in all other stages of economic development. Clearly, Henzler's model has contributed greatly toward separating strategic marketing approaches to employ for global markets in varying stages of economic development.

Conclusion and Implications for Multinational Business and Modern Language Educators

U. S. participation in global marketing efforts will doubtlessly continue in the years and decades ahead as the world tends to become smaller and increasingly dependent on international trade. U. S. businesses have realized now for many years that a policy of "commercial isolation" will simply not work in the type of economically, politically, and socially complex environment in which the contemporary world finds itself. More and more, multinational business operations and global commercial interdependence will be standard operating procedures, rather than optimal avenues of profitability for business firms throughout the world. If the United States is to maintain its great strength and progressive image in the world-trade community, American business managers, and particularly those in the marketing area, must be constantly engaged in the discovery, analysis, and effective tapping of global markets. One of the greatest assets which U. S. firms already have, and will continue to have, is the international training and knowledge of their employees. It will become even more important in the years ahead for any company wishing to market across cultures to attract, motivate, and retain young men and women specifically trained in the language, culture, politics, and economics of consumer and business markets throughout the world. Where then do these firms find such young people for positions in international marketing research, sales, product management, distribution planning, promotional strategy, and customer relations? The most obvious answer seems to be found in those individuals who have received specialized training in multinational business and foreign language programs. It would be a comforting, but highly dangerous and unwarranted assumption for American business leaders to accept the notion that many such trained

professionals currently exist in the United States. Unfortunately for the U. S., they seem to be born, trained, and employed in other countries with whom we compete at this time. Only now are more U. S. colleges and universities beginning to offer such programs, but they still remain in the minority. It is becoming abundantly clear as time passes and as the American business practitioner looks to past mistakes in global markets. that financial and placement support for academically and professionally trained individuals in multinational business and modern languages are sorely and critically necessary for the United States in its quest for maintenance, expansion, and creativity, in marketing across cultures.

Table 1

Developing Standard Marketing Strategies

Phase	Developing	Take-Off	Mature
Basic Strategy	Test Market Pursue profitable individual projects and/or export activities	Build Base Allocate substantial resources to establish leading position in market	Expand/Round off operations Allocate resources selectively to develop market niches
Elements of Strategy			
Investment	Minimize (distribution and services)	Invest to expand capacity (relatively long payback)	Expand selectively in R&D, production, and distribution (relatively short payback)
Risk	Avoid	Accept	Limit
Market share	Concentrate on key projects; possibly build position in profitable businesses with local support	Extend base with --new products --new outlets --new applications	Expand/defend
Price	Price high	Aim for price leadership (at both ends)	Back stable market price level
Product	Standard technology, simple products	Aim for wide "innovator" role	Full product line in selected areas, products of high technical quality

Phase	Developing	Take-off	Mature
Costs	Minimum acceptable (especially reduction of guarantee	Economies of scale, reduction of fixed costs	Rationalize; optimize resources
Elements of strategy			
Marketing	Selective advertising --with typical high-prestige products --Aiming at decision-makers	Active utilization of selective marketing resources	Selected product advertising
Know-how	Document know-how on reference projects	Use local know-how in --product technology --product engineering	Transfer know-how in special product lines; acquire local know-how to round off own base

Source: Taken from Herbert Henzler, "Shaping an International Investment Strategy," The McKinsey Quarterly, Spring 1981, p. 77.

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